HOLOYLE COMMUNITY College was founded on the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to receive an affordable and quality college education. Everyone.

From the college’s earliest days following World War II, George Frost, Holyoke Community’s first president, put that principle into practice, signing up students who were, in the eyes of others, “not college material!”—those with poor high school records, soldiers returning from military service, women entering the workforce for the first time after raising families, older adults seeking new careers after laboring for years in dead-end jobs.

We see the same types of students today and more—high school students, high school dropouts, single moms, and working parents, immigrants whose first language is not English and their children, many from disadvantaged families who have never sent anyone to college before. All of our students, then and now, no matter what background, skills, experience or interests they bring, come to us with a desire to better themselves and build better lives for their families. A college education is part of their American dream.

As HCC, the oldest two-year college in Massachusetts, prepares to enter its 75th anniversary year in 2021, we are facing a crisis like no other in modern history, a global pandemic that has upended all our lives and strained all our resources. In this, we are not alone.

Historically, community colleges serve the most vulnerable populations and receive the least amount of funding. If we’ve learned anything in the past two months it’s that this pandemic has exposed and amplified existing inequities in our society and in higher education.

Almost 50% of Holyoke Community College students qualify for Federal Pell Grants. That means they are considered low income. On any given day, when we are not dealing with a pandemic crisis, we are dealing with students struggling with nonacademic challenges that can derail their college educations if left unaddressed, most significantly hunger, homelessness and housing insecurity, affordable health care, and lack of adequate technology, transportation and child care.

To make ends meet, they rely on part-time and full-time jobs in area businesses that are now closed, and so they are coping with the increased burden of income loss on top of the stress and anxiety that comes with being a college student forced to stay home and all the inherent distractions that brings living through these uncertain times.

At HCC, despite transitioning remote learning for the spring semester, supporting students in their studies and in their personal lives remains our number one priority.

Prior to this crisis, the college already had an established Student Emergency Fund managed by the HCC Foundation that has seen applications skyrocket during the past two months as students struggle to pay for food, rent and utilities.

Meanwhile, our Thrive Student Resource Center and Food Pantry continue to operate. Staff members have been making safe home deliveries of groceries to food-insecure students and helping students apply for federal food subsidies and other critical benefits. The college has purchased hundreds of laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots that students can borrow from the college library if they do not have computers or reliable internet access at home.

All our academic support services, from tutoring, financial aid, advising, transfer, career planning remain available by email, phone and remote forums such as Zoom and Google Hangouts. And we have created a Care Call Team that calls every one of our students every week to ensure they remain engaged.

A 2018 study calculated HCC’s economic impact on Western Mass to be $214.6 million a year. Extrapolate that to all 15 Massachusetts community colleges and the impact is billions.

Christina Royal, the president of Holyoke Community College. To learn more about the college and its programs, go online to hcc.edu.